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Mayor's goal: Bring 10,000 new families to city in a decade

Rawlings-Blake plans to discuss growing Baltimore in Tuesday inaugural speech

By Julie Scharper, The Baltimore Sun

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Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake hopes to attract 10,000 families to Baltimore in the next decade — which would reverse more than a half-century of population decline — and would like to serve at least one more term beyond the one she begins Tuesday.

In a preview of her inaugural address, Rawlings-Blake and her aides said Monday that the mayor plans to highlight the necessity of growing the city's population, despite continually tight finances.

"If Baltimore is to have a future, the leadership in the city has to focus on making the city a vibrant, growing city," Rawlings-Blake said in an interview Monday. "If you're not focused on growing it, you're resigned to a slow death."

She did not specify what she would do to attract new residents to Baltimore and keep those it has now. But she said she plans to focus the city's limited resources on basic services, such as police and schools, while calling on residents to support her administration in the face of dwindling resources.

"It has to be a collective effort," said Rawlings-Blake. "In a time when we're shrinking the size of government, beyond the fact that we all have to get engaged and be a part of the solution, we also have to understand that we're going to be called upon to make not just tough decisions but also sacrifices."

The mayor spoke on the eve of her inauguration, which is scheduled to be held in front of City Hall on Tuesday morning. A \$75-per-ticket ball will be held at the city-owned Hyatt Hotel on Tuesday night.

Rawlings-Blake has grappled with a steady stream of challenges since she was elevated to the mayor's office in February 2010, after Sheila Dixon's resignation amid a cloud of scandal. She has struggled with major budget shortfalls and the perception that crime is worsening in the city, despite statistics to the contrary. She also inherited huge problems, including at least 30,000 vacant properties and crumbling school buildings that require an estimated \$2.8 billion in repairs.

She secured an easy victory in the September Democratic primary, getting 52 percent of the vote amid historically low turnout, and swept past her Republican challenger in last month's general election.

Political observers said that growing the city is a daunting endeavor, especially against the backdrop of its fiscal challenges. Her goal of 10,000 families is equivalent to roughly 22,000 people, her aides said.

"It's courageous," Herb Smith, a McDaniel College political scientist, said of the mayor's goal. "Normally, elected officials are somewhat loath to put actual numbers down."

Smith, a city resident, added, "The great difficulty with growing the city is attracting a larger middle-class base that stays and doesn't leave once the children are ready to go to public school."

Baltimore's population has fallen by nearly 320,000 residents since 1960, when nearly 940,000 people lived in the city. While the rate of decline slowed in the past decade, many nearby cities, including Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., gained population.

Rawlings-Blake said that she has laid the groundwork for initiatives to address the city's key problems, including efforts to speed the sale of vacant housing; lower the property tax rate slightly; and finance school repairs through, in part, an increase in the tax on bottled beverages.

She said a task force she brought together to draft a 10-year financial plan for the city would be instrumental in her plans for growth. The panel is

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examining ways to rein in fixed costs, such as pensions and benefits, that consume half of the city's budget.

Rawlings-Blake said Tuesday that she plans to run for mayor again in 2015 to see her projects come to fruition. "I love what I do, and I think cities are where it's at, not just for now but for the future," she said.

Former Mayor Kurt Schmoke applauded her goal of building the city's population but noted the difficulties of luring new residents into urban areas during trying times.

"When the economy goes bad, people look for the least expensive places to live," said Schmoke. "When you look at property taxes, insurance costs, as well as public education and perceptions of safety, unfortunately, urban areas often come up on the short end of the measuring stick."

But Baltimore also offers many benefits to new residents, Schmoke said, such as the ability to live near jobs, the proximity to mass transit, and many opportunities for real estate investment.

"She has to be clear-eyed about the fact that it's not going to be a straight line of progress," he said. "She can do a lot of wonderful things, but if she has a couple of days of bad crime news, she has to start again."

Schmoke recommended that Rawlings-Blake rally the support of residents, in part, by celebrating small successes. "She becomes promoter in chief of the city," he said.

Rawlings-Blake spent much of Monday doing just that, touting a \$3.8 million project spearheaded by the Weinberg Foundation that will bring new computers, books and "parents' corners" to four school libraries.

She then headed to a luncheon sponsored by the Greater Baltimore Committee and the quasi-public Baltimore Development Corporation, where she presented the annual "Mayor's Business Recognition Awards" to 13 companies, including Constellation Energy, that support charities through donations and volunteer hours.

Rawlings-Blake also dealt with some of the city's thornier challenges Monday. She met with the city's volunteerism czar, Vu Dang, to discuss, among other initiatives, a program that is enlisting former drug addicts to help others seek treatment.

Later, she met with education advocates from the American Civil Liberties Union and Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development to talk about her plans to leverage funds to finance about \$300 million in repairs to city schools. Rawlings-Blake has said she will push legislation in the City Council to raise the city's bottle tax from 2 to 5 cents, a proposal that has already drawn an outcry from merchants and beverage distributors.

Lester Spence, a political science professor at the Johns Hopkins University, questioned what kind of residents Rawlings-Blake hoped to attract to the city. Was the mayor seeking middle- and upper-class families, or the very poor?

Spence said that rather than trying to lure new residents, the mayor should push harder to improve the lives of poor people who live in the city now.

Rawlings-Blake could be "a bit more aggressive in making claims to the state of Maryland and the federal government for the working-class and poor residents," he said. "She had an overwhelming mandate, and she could really step out of the box and do something."

As a driver ferried the mayor through East Baltimore streets on the chilly, foggy morning, Rawlings-Blake reflected on her hopes for the city.

"I'm noting areas where we need to send people out," she said, as the pale blue Chrysler town car passed a litter-strewn alley. "But I also noticed a beautiful community green space."

"I grew up with a profound love for my city, and I get to have a job that arguably has one of the biggest impacts on that city," she said. "What I focus on is the opportunity to transform the city."

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Inauguration

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake will be sworn in Tuesday morning outside Baltimore City Hall, 100 Holliday St. Anyone wishing to attend the inauguration is asked to arrive by 10:45 a.m. to pass through security. Ceremonies are scheduled to begin at 11:30 a.m.

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